Backgrounder
No. 2468
October 17, 2010
Revised and updated October 4, 2010
Published by The Heritage Foundation

Closing the Racial Achievement Gap: Learning from Florida's Reforms

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Abstract: *An education gap between white students and their black and Hispanic peers is something to which most Americans have become accustomed. But this racial division of education—and hence of prospects for the future—is nothing less than tragic. The good news is that the racial divide in learning is a problem that can be fixed. Of course, it can only be fixed if education reform is approached in a commonsense and innovative way. Continuing to repeat the largely failed national policies and ever-increasing spending of the past decades is surely not common sense. One state, Florida, has demonstrated that meaningful academic improvement—for students of all races and economic backgrounds—is possible. In 1999, Florida enacted far-reaching K–12 education reform that includes public and private school choice, charter schools, virtual education, performance-based pay for teachers, grading of schools and districts, annual tests, curbing social promotion, and alternative teacher certification. As a result of parental choice, higher standards, accountability, and flexibility, Florida's Hispanic students are now outperforming or tied with the overall average for all students in 31 states. It is vital that national and state policymakers take the lessons of Florida's success to heart. The future of millions of American children depends on it.*

Talking Points

- Despite growing education spending and the federal government's ever-increasing role in education, national academic achievement has remained relatively flat and racial achievement gaps persist.
- While only limited progress has been made in addressing the K–12 achievement gaps nationally, one state, Florida, has made significant progress in narrowing the gap between white and minority students.
- Through common sense, systemic education reforms—ending "social promotion," alternative teacher certification, grading schools and school districts, merit pay for teachers, and school choice—the Sunshine State has made dramatic improvements in the academic outcomes of all its students.
- After a decade of strong improvement, black students in Florida now outscore or tie the statewide reading average for all students in eight states. Florida's Hispanic students now outscore or tie the statewide average for all students in 31 states.
- Policymakers should look to Florida as a model for successful education reform.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
http://report.heritage.org/bg2468

Produced by the Domestic Policy Studies Department

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
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For years, policymakers around the country have looked for ways to address the racial achievement gap in K–12 education. Despite significant increases in education spending at all levels and the federal government's ever-increasing role in education, national academic achievement has remained relatively flat,

graduation rates have stagnated around 70 percent, and racial disparities persist. Many states have enacted policies to address racial disparities in academic achievement and attainment, but the changes have been largely piecemeal.

One state, however, has demonstrated that meaningful improvement is possible. In 1999, Florida enacted a series of far-reaching K–12 education reforms that have increased academic achievement for all students and substantially narrowed the racial achievement gap. Today, Florida's Hispanic and black students outscore many statewide reading averages for *all* students.

The Sunshine State's reform model includes:

- **Public-school choice.** Students in low-performing public schools may transfer to a higher-performing public school of their parents' choice.
- **Private-school choice.** Families with special-needs children have access to the McKay Scholarship Program, which provides vouchers to attend a private school of choice. Corporations in Florida can also receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions to organizations that fund private scholarships for low-income students.
- **Charter schools.** Charter schools offer families another choice. During the 2008–2009 school year more than 100,000 Florida students attended charter schools, and more than 50 new charter schools began operation.
- **Virtual education.** Florida is a leader in online learning. More than 71,000 students in the state take courses online.
- **Performance pay.** Florida's performance pay system rewards teachers who achieve student gains, not necessarily those who have the longest tenure. It also provides bonuses for teachers who increase the number of students who pass Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Since beginning performance rewards for AP completion, Florida has considerably increased the number of all students who take and pass AP exams.
- **Alternative teacher certification.** Non-traditional routes to teacher certification, such as permitting school districts to offer teacher certification programs, reciprocity with other state teaching certificates, and honoring certification offered through alternative teacher certification programs such as the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), play an important role in bringing qualified teachers into the classroom.
- **A+ Accountability Plan.** In 1999, Florida required that students be tested annually. While Florida has graded the performance of its public schools since 1995, in 1999 the Sunshine State moved to a more straightforward grading system. The new grading system, coupled with the introduction of the annual Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), means that students *and* schools are held accountable for academic outcomes.
- **Social Promotion Ban.** Florida has also curtailed the "social promotion" of students. The reform plan requires students to pass the third-grade reading FCAT before progressing to fourth grade. Despite the nation's limited progress in raising the scores of minority students overall, Florida has made enormous progress in narrowing racial achievement gaps.

Efforts to address racial achievement gaps from Washington, D.C.—from the War on Poverty of the mid-1960s to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002—have sadly proven expensive and largely ineffective. Fortunately, the genius of federalism has produced an impressive example of a state that deviated from the typical formula of throwing ever more money at schools without changing a thing. Florida has succeeded in narrowing racial achievement gaps; policymakers in other states should follow its lead.

The Racial Divide: Discussed Around the Country, Tackled in Florida

In 1997, Professor Lawrence Stedman of the State University of New York described the severe extent of the racial achievement gap at a Brookings Institution conference:

> Twelfth-grade black students are performing at the level of middle school white students. These students are about to graduate, yet they lag four or more years behind in every area including math, science, writing, his-

> tory, and geography. Latino seniors do somewhat better than 8th-grade white students in math and writing but, in other areas, are also four years behind white 12th graders.... Schools and society remains divided into two different worlds, one black, one white, separate and unequal.[1]

Thirteen years later, only limited progress has been made in addressing the K–12 achievement gaps. In 2008, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) long-term trend data revealed that white eighth-graders scored two points above the national average for black 12th-graders and one point below that of Hispanic 12th-graders.[2] Despite a non-stop education reform debate, substantial increases in inflation-adjusted spending per pupil, and the federal passage of No Child Left Behind, racial achievement gaps stubbornly endure.

The endurance of racial achievement gaps has led some to argue that Americans simply should not expect much progress without vastly increasing the size and scope of the welfare state. In her first speech as president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten launched the first salvo of the union's "Broader, Bolder" campaign:

> Imagine schools that are open all day and offer after-school and evening recreational activities and homework assistance…and suppose the schools included child-care and dental, medical and counseling clinics, or other services the community needs. For example, they might offer neighborhood residents English language instruction, GED programs, or legal assistance.[3]

On average, Americans can expect to pay more than $50,000 for each child in the nation's public school system by the time that child reaches fourth grade. Yet, in 2009, 34 percent of public school fourth graders scored "below basic" in reading on the NAEP. If public schools cannot be trusted to teach children how to read, why should they be expected to fix children's teeth or to resolve parental legal issues?

Weingarten and other "Broader, Bolder" supporters seem to believe that schools can improve academically by focusing on issues other than academics. This, of course, is precisely the wrong direction to take. Professor Paul Hill of the University of Washington recently conducted a series of studies concerning the stubborn lack of academic progress in public schools despite increased spending. After a series of studies, Hill reached the conclusion that

> money is used so loosely in public education—in ways that few understand and that lack plausible connections to student learning—that no one can say how much money, if used optimally, would be enough. Accounting systems make it impossible to track how much is spent on a particular child or school, and hide the costs of programs and teacher contracts. Districts can't choose the most cost-effective programs because they lack evidence on costs and results.[4]

A great deal is known about how much money is spent on schools, but very little is known about the percentage that actually reaches students in the form of effective learning strategies. The broader and bolder crowd has mistaken the disease for the cure: Schools are already drowning in money but the system is failing to equip millions of students with basic academic skills. American schools do not lack for resources; rather, they desperately need to make better use of their funds.

1. Howard Fuller, "The Real Evidence: An Honest Update on School Choice Experiments," *Wisconsin Interest* (Fall/Winter 1997), p. 19.
2. National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP Data Explorer," at *http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata* (August 27, 2010).
3. "Randi Weingarten elected AFT President," WNET.org, July 15, 2008, at *http://thirteencelebration.org/blog/edblog/randi-weingarten-elected-aft-president/90/* (September 9. 2010). Ms. Weingarten was elected president of the American Federation of Teachers on July 14, 2008. This quotation is from her acceptance speech.
4. Paul T. Hill and Marguerite Roza, "The End of School Finance As We Know It," *Education Week*, April 30, 2008, at *http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/news/50* (August 27, 2010).

Advocates for expanding the public education welfare state would do well to read Terry Moe and John Chubb's book *Liberating Learning*. Moe and Chubb detail the history of K–12 reform since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. *A Nation at Risk* famously warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in American schools. The report went so far as to say that if a foreign power had saddled the U.S. with such ineffective schools, the country would consider it an act of war.

A Nation at Risk served as a clarion call for reform, but Moe and Chubb chillingly describe the politics of the reform era as a game of Whack-a-Mole played by the dominant player in K–12 politics: the teacher unions. Whack-a-Mole is an old carnival game played with a hole-filled board, someone to move the mole through the holes, and someone else attempting to whack the mole with a hammer.[5]

The primary concern of the teacher unions is protecting the employment interests of their members (through tenure and tenure-like contract provisions) and maximizing public school revenue. As Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers put it, "When school children start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of school children." A New York City school principal told *The New Yorker* that the current president of the American Federation of Teachers "would protect a dead body in the classroom."[6]

Moe and Chubb argue that the political *modus operandi* of the education unions is to oppose any reform that does not involve increasing public school revenue and employment. Thus, unions oppose parental choice, alternative teacher certification, rigorous standards, and accountability. Moe and Chubb argue that the unions do not manage to whack every mole every time, but that they whack most of the moles most of the time. Education unions are huge multi-million-dollar entities organized in every legislative district in the country. They hire lobbyists, contribute millions to political campaigns, and send volunteers to work on campaigns. There is little to match the unions on the reformers' side—unions wield real political power and have an intense interest in K–12 policy in terms of gaining yet more power.

The American public school system, with a few exceptions, largely reflects the policy preferences of the leadership of the education unions. Spending per pupil has risen far faster than the rate of inflation for decades, while the average class size has declined substantially. All the while, academic achievement remained relatively flat, and graduation rates have stagnated around 70 percent. The American system of public schools has done a much better job maximizing employment for adults than learning for children.

While many states have managed to enact K–12 policies disliked by the unions, these changes have been largely piecemeal. All states have created state academic standards and accountability tests, but few have had the courage to do much with the results. Many states have enacted charter school laws, but most state laws cap or hamstring the creation of new charter schools. A large and growing number of states have passed parental choice programs including private options, but growth has been limited due, in part, to fierce union opposition.

In 1999, Florida enacted a series of far-reaching K–12 reforms despite opposition by the teacher unions. Then-Governor Jeb Bush made K–12 reform his top priority, and the majority of Florida legislators strongly supported reform. The result was unique: The unions effectively lost control of K–12 policy in Florida.

Today, Florida's Hispanic and black students have significantly narrowed the racial achievement gap. Moreover, they have begun to outscore many statewide averages for all students. Florida's academic successes were made possible by commonsense

5. Terry M. Moe and John E. Chubb, *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of American Education* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2009), pp. 29–56.
6. Steven Brill, "The Rubber Room: The Battle Over New York City's Worst Teachers," *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2009, at *http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/08/31/090831fa_fact_brill#ixzz0jEjLuhxrhttp://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/08/31/090831fa_fact_brill* (August 27, 2010).

changes to the educational landscape achieved by reformers, students, and teachers.

The Racial Divide: The U.S. *vs.* Florida

Fourth-grade reading gains are an important focus of education reform because early childhood literacy is the gateway to all other learning. Florida students have demonstrated the strongest gains on the NAEP in the nation since 2003, when all 50 states began taking NAEP exams.[7]

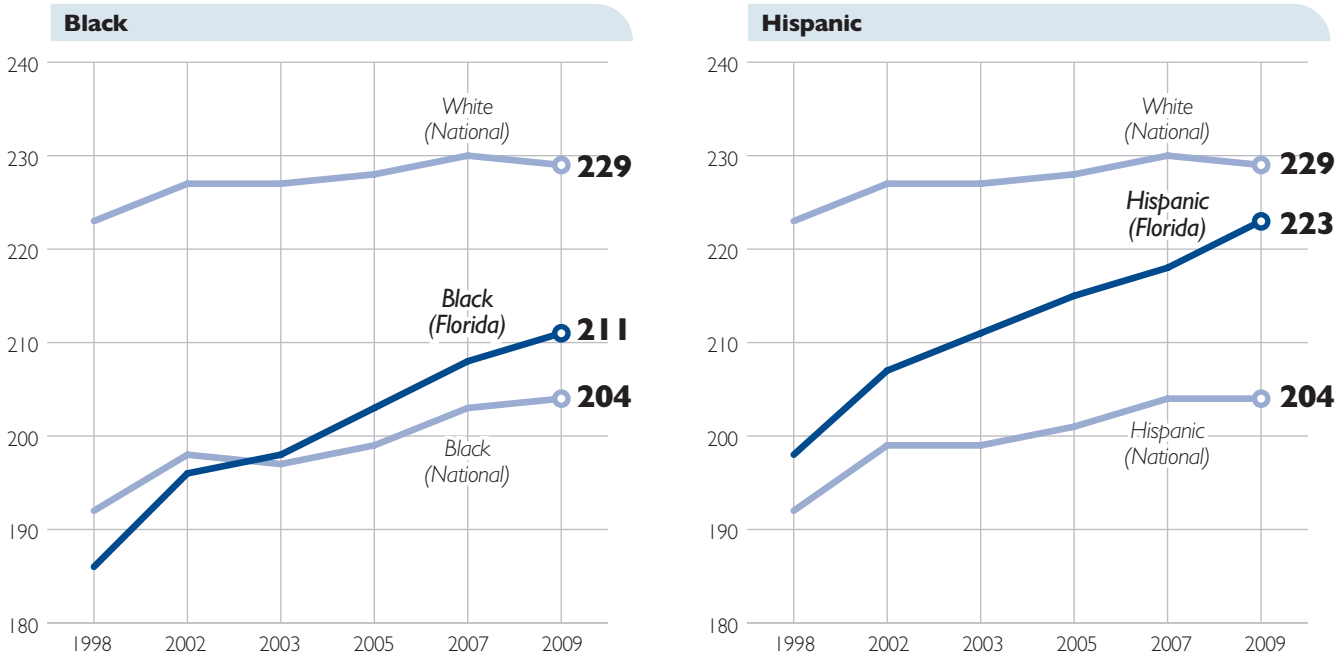
From kindergarten to third grade, children learn how to read. After third grade, they read to learn a variety of subjects. Literacy research shows that many children who do not learn basic literacy skills in the early grades never catch up later, as it becomes increasingly difficult to acquire literacy skills. The appalling racial gaps described in the first paragraphs of this paper among 12th-graders are not solely the product of the high school years. Those teenagers began the process of academic failure as youngsters and progressively fell further and further behind over time. Early literacy skills are absolutely essential to long-term academic success.

Chart 1 presents achievement gap data from the fourth-grade reading NAEP, beginning before the Florida reforms (1998) and moving to the present. Chart 1 presents the national average score for white students, the national average for black students, and Florida's average for black students.

Florida's Minorities Narrow the Racial Achievement Gap

In 1998, black and Hispanic students in the U.S. lagged far behind whites in fourth-grade reading scores. While that trend largely continues today, Florida minorities have made significant strides toward narrowing the gap.

NAEP Scores for 4th-Grade Reading



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Nation's Report Card, at *http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2009/state_g4.asp?subtab_id=Tab_5&tab_id=tab1#tabsContainer* (August 2, 2010), and at *http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2009/state_g4.asp?subtab_id=Tab_6&tab_id=tab1#tabsContainer* (August 2, 2010).

Chart 1 • B 2468 heritage.org

7. Effective in 2003, No Child Left Behind made participation in NAEP a requirement for receipt of federal funds. Before 2003, state participation in NAEP was voluntary.

Between 1998 and 2002, the average score for black students increased by 12 points from 192 to 204. In Florida, it increased by 25 points—twice the gains of the national average. If black students nationwide had made the same amount of progress as black students in Florida, the fourth-grade reading gap between black and white would be approximately half the size it is today.

Chart 1 also presents the same data for Hispanic students nationally and in Florida, and for white students nationally.

In 1998, Florida's Hispanic students scored six points above the national average for Hispanic students, but 25 points below the average for white students. Between 1998 and 2009, Florida's Hispanics made the same amount of progress as black students: 25 points. Just as with black students, Florida's Hispanic students made twice as much progress as the national average for Hispanics.

The gap between Hispanic students in Florida and white students nationally declined from 25 points to six points between 1998 and 2009. Chart 2 demonstrates the same data in terms of achievement levels instead of scores on the fourth-grade reading NAEP. NAEP has four achievement levels: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. Chart 2 shows the percentage of Florida's black and Hispanic students who scored "basic" or better in 1998 compared to white students nationally, as well as the same achievement data from the 2009 exam.

Charts 1–2 show how to close the racial achievement gaps. If trends since 1998 were to hold nationally, it would be about 33 years before we could expect Hispanics to close the gap with their white peers. In Florida, however, black students could catch up in half that time, and Hispanics could exceed the national average for white students as early as 2011.

Florida's Minority Students: Outpacing Other States

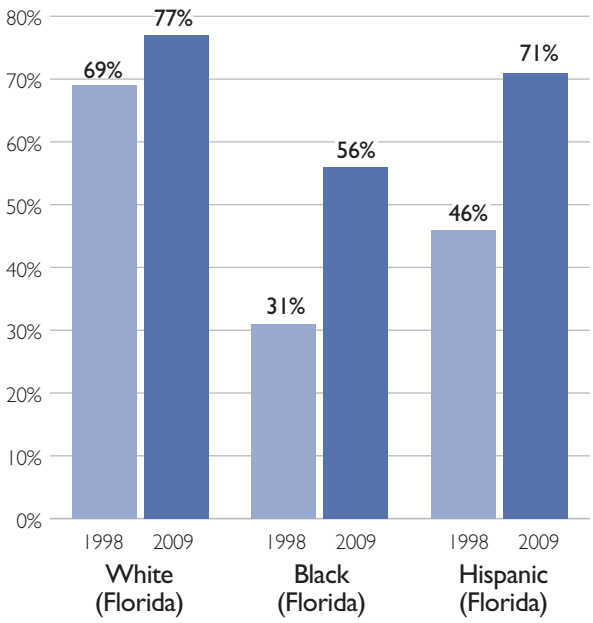
Florida's minority students have not only begun to close the racial divide, they have also outscored or tied a number of statewide averages for all students on fourth-grade reading. After a decade of K–12 education reform, Florida's Hispanic and black students have outscored averages for many other states. The Sunshine State's success puts it at the forefront of education reform, and proves that demography does not equal destiny.

Florida's radical success is best illustrated with a map. (See Map 1.)

In 1998, Florida's black students scored below the national average on fourth-grade reading, approximately 1.5 grade levels below even the most poorly performing states (Hawaii and Louisiana tied for the bottom score with average scores of 200). By 2009, Florida's black children outscored or tied statewide averages for all children in eight states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, and New Mexico. Black children in Florida pulled off this feat despite the fact that

Florida Minorities Show Dramatic Improvement in Reading Scores

Percentage of Florida Students Scoring "Basic" or Better in the Fourth-Grade Reading NAEP

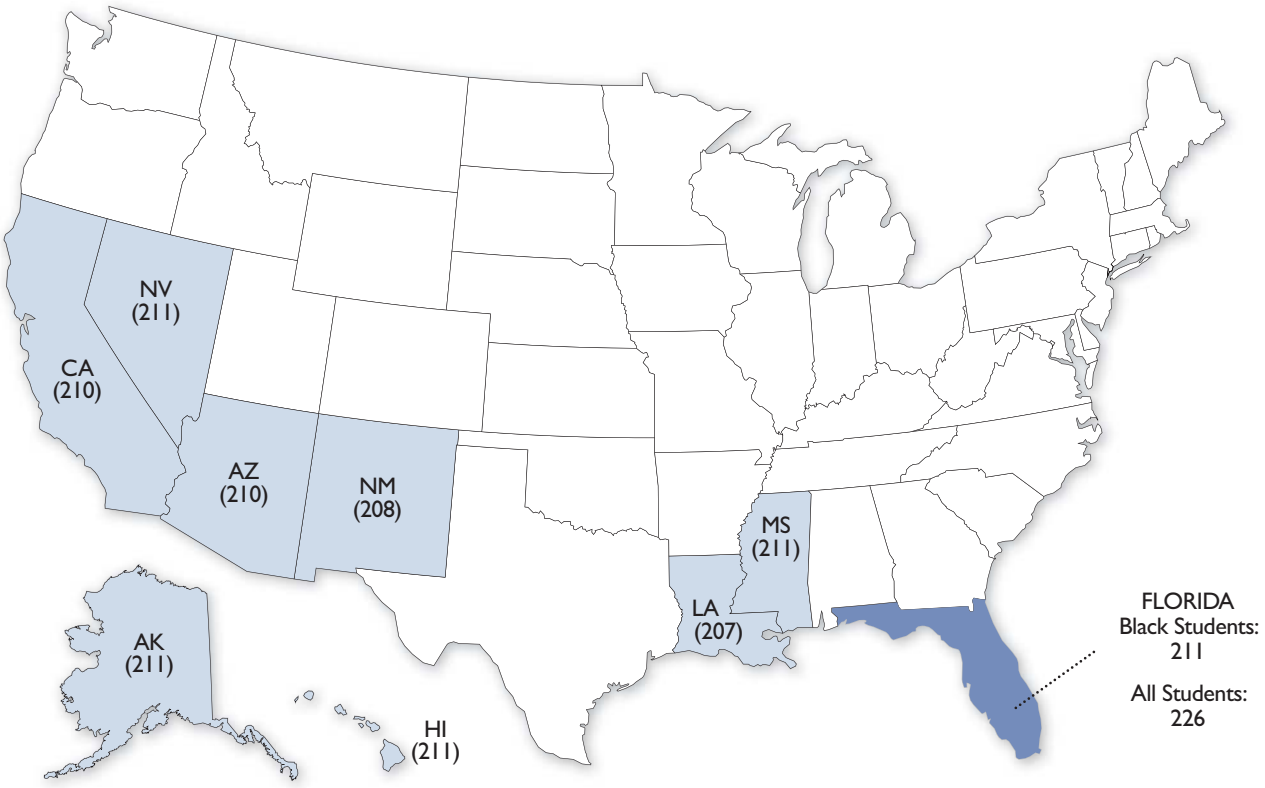


Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Nation's Report Card, at *http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2009/ state_g4.asp?subtab_id=Tab_5&tab_id=tab1 #tabsContainer* (August 2, 2010); *http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2009/ state_g4.asp?subtab_id=Tab_6&tab_id=tab1 #tabsContainer* (August 2, 2010); *http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2009/state_g4.asp? subtab_id=Tab_1&tab_id=tab1 #tabsContainer* (August 2, 2010).

Chart 2 • B 2468 heritage.org

Comparing State Averages to Florida's Black Students

Black students in Florida now outscore or tie the statewide reading average of all students in eight states.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, at *http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/* (August 2, 2010).

Map 1 • B 2468 heritage.org

all eight states improved somewhat themselves between 1998 and 2009.

For purposes of clarity, Map 1 compares only Florida's black students against the state averages for all students in these eight states. Thus, California's average, for example, includes children of all income levels and ethnicities. The NAEP derived the California number from a statewide sample including children from affluent suburbs.[8]

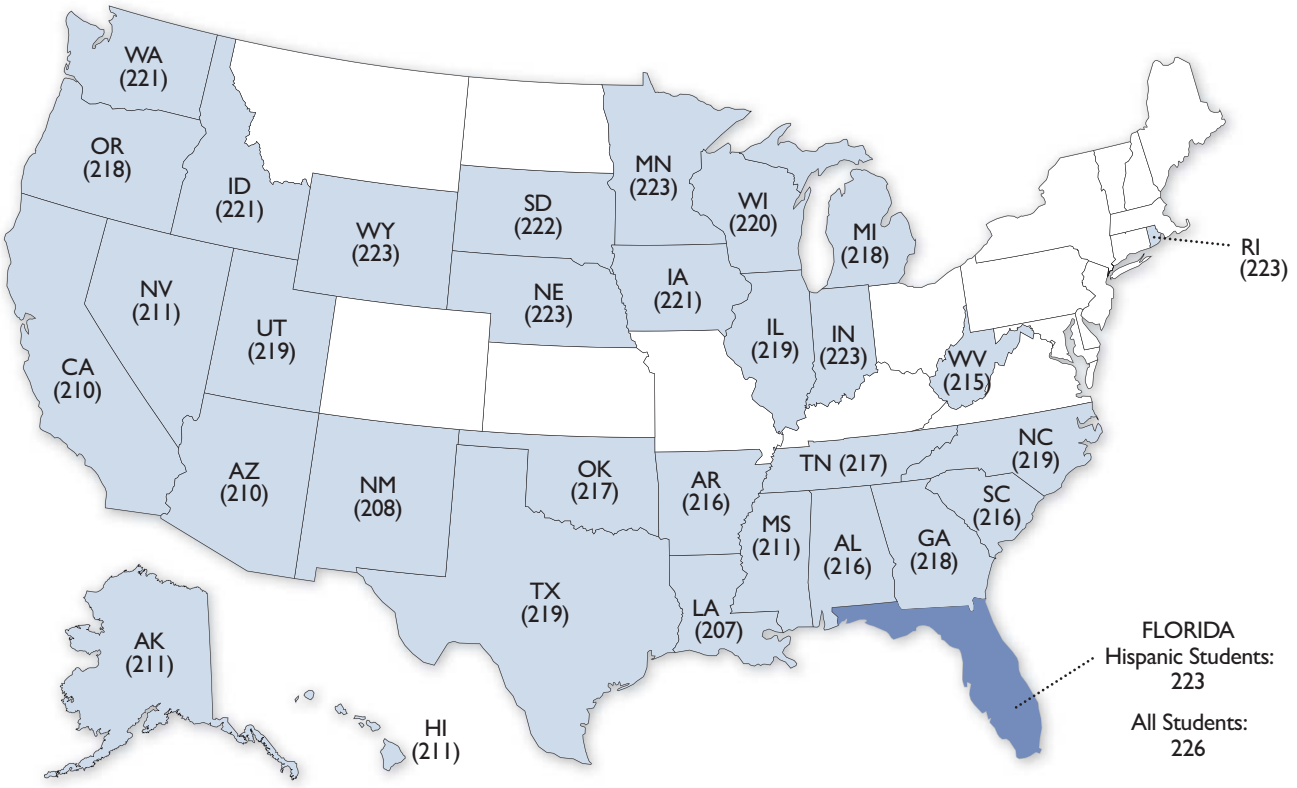
Map 2 focuses on fourth-grade reading scores for Florida's Hispanic students from the 2009 Nation's Report Card. The map highlights the states in which the average score for *all* students is either less than or equal to the average score for Florida's Hispanic students. The map demonstrates an impressive accomplishment, especially considering the fact that students take the fourth-grade reading NAEP in English. After a decade of strong improvement, Florida's Hispanic students now outscore or tie 31 state averages.

Noteworthy is the large number of states with predominantly white populations highlighted on the map: Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Washing-

8. Since the NAEP uses representative samples of students rather than testing every student in every state, there is a margin of sampling error, meaning that the score for Florida's black students (211) and that for all California students (210) should be considered a tie, given that a single point difference lies within the margin of error.

Comparing State Averages to Florida's Hispanic Students

Hispanic students in Florida now outscore or tie the statewide reading average of all students in 31 states.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, at *http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/* (August 2, 2010).

Map 2 • B 2468 heritage.org

ton, and Wyoming. Also noteworthy are North Carolina and Texas, two states proud of their K–12 reforms in the previous decade, and Tennessee, one of the two first-round finalists in the Obama Administration's Race to the Top competition.

Today, the average Hispanic student in Florida scores almost the equivalent of two grade levels higher than the average for his peers around the country. On fourth-grade reading, the racial achievement gap between white students nationally and Hispanic students in Florida has dropped by 76 percent since 1998.

How did Florida do it? The state's success resulted from common sense reforms implemented during Governor Jeb Bush's tenure, detailed below.

The Florida Reforms: A Model of Success

Beginning in 1999, two years before the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Florida began a comprehensive overhaul of its education system. Governor Jeb Bush presided over a suite of aggressive education reforms, which included strong standards, true accountability, and transparency. During the decade that followed—a decade marked by a significant increase in federal control of education—the Sunshine State pursued its own course of education reform that it continues to improve today.

Parental Choice. Florida's reform model includes robust school choice options. Today, families in Florida have access to public-school choice,

private-school choice, charter schools, and online learning:

- **Public-school choice.** As originally crafted in 1999, the school choice component of Florida's education reform model allowed students in schools that had received an "F" for two of the previous four years to receive a voucher to attend a higher-performing public or private school of their parents' choice. A 2006 Florida supreme court decision eliminated the private-school provision.
- **Private-school choice.** Since 2000, families in Florida with special-needs children have had access to the McKay Scholarship Program, which provides vouchers to attend a private school of choice. During the 2008–2009 school year, 20,530 Florida students received scholarships through the McKay program.[9] In April 2010, the Florida legislature passed an expansion to the McKay voucher program, permitting special-needs preschoolers to become eligible for a scholarship upon kindergarten entry. Corporations in Florida can receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions to organizations that fund private scholarships for low-income students.[10]
- **Charter schools.** Charter schools—public schools that are free from much of the regulation that binds traditional public schools—offer families another choice in the Sunshine State. During the 2008–2009 school year, more than 100,000 Florida students attended charter schools, and more than 50 new charter schools began operation.[11] Florida's vibrant charter school environment makes it one of the strongest states in the country for charter schools.
- **Virtual education.** Florida is also a leader in online learning. The Florida Virtual School, one of the largest virtual schools in the country, enrolled more than 71,000 students during the 2008–2009 school year.[12]

Performance Pay and Alternative Teacher Certification. In 2002, Florida began offering alternative routes to teacher certification. Today, nearly half of all teachers come to the profession through an alternative certification program.[13] Every school district in Florida now offers an alternative teacher certification through on-the-job training. The Sunshine State also established Educator Preparation Institutes to offer fast-tracked teacher certification for college graduates who have subject matter competency but did not obtain an education degree, and for mid-career professionals.[14] Florida also honors other alternative paths to teacher certification, such as the American Board for Certification of

9. Lindsey Burke, "School Choice in America 2009: What it Means for Children's Futures," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2332, November 4, 2009, at *http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/11/School-Choice-in-America-2009-What-it-Means-for-Childrens-Futures* (August 27, 2010).
10. Researchers found that the tax credit program led to statistically significant improvements in Florida's public schools. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which allows corporations to receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for donations to scholarship-granting organizations that provide vouchers to low-income children to attend a private school of their parents' choice, was found to have an impact on a multi-billion-dollar public school system. Competition placed on the Florida public school system as a result of the voucher program led to improvements in the test scores of public school students. See David Figlio and Cassandra M.D. Hart, "Competitive Effects of Means-tested School Vouchers," Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, May 2010, at *http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/papers/2010/IPR-WP-10-03.pdf* (September 30, 2010).
11. Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice, "About Florida's Charter Schools," Florida Department of Education, at *http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/Information/Charter_Schools/* (August 27, 2010).
12. Florida Virtual School, "2008–2009 FLVS Enrollment Summary," July 1, 2009, at *http://www.flvs.net/areas/aboutus/Documents/EnrollmentSummary.pdf* (August 27, 2010).
13. Matthew Ladner and Dan Lips, "How 'No Child Left Behind' Threatens Florida's Successful Education Reforms," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2226, January 7, 2009, at *http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/01/How-No-Child-Left-Behind-Threatens-Floridas-Successful-Education-Reforms* (August 27, 2010).
14. Florida Department of Education, "Florida Colleges: Educator Preparation Institutes," at *http://www.fldoe.org/cc/OSAS/aptp/epi.asp* (August 27, 2010).

Teacher Excellence (ABCTE).[15] Further, Florida offers reciprocity with teaching certificates from other states and allows college education minors to enter the teaching profession. Providing robust alternative routes to the classroom ensures that Florida can attract high quality teachers.

While alternative teacher certification attracts high quality teachers to the Sunshine State, Florida's performance pay helps keep them in the classroom. Florida's pay system rewards those teachers who achieve significant student gains in subject areas assessed on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Teachers can receive up to 10 percent of their base salary in performance pay.[16] In addition, Florida has implemented a school recognition program, which provides bonuses of $75 per student for improving a letter grade on the state's report card system or for maintaining an "A." The bonuses go directly to principals and teachers, bypassing collective bargaining.[17]

Another aspect of Florida's performance pay plan includes rewarding teachers with bonuses for increasing the number of students who pass Advanced Placement (AP) courses. AP teachers receive $50 for every AP class that a child successfully passes, with total bonuses capped at $2,000 per school year. Schools, not school districts, also receive bonuses of $700 for each student who passes an AP exam. Finally, schools that received a "D" or "F" are eligible to receive an additional $500 for each student who passes an AP exam.[18]

There is evidence that Florida's emphasis on Advanced Placement coursework is paying off. Since beginning performance rewards for successful AP completion, Florida has made significant progress in increasing the number of students who take and pass AP exams. In 2009, 40.2 percent of Florida's public school graduates took an AP exam, compared to just 26.5 percent nationally. In 2009, 21.3 percent of those test-takers in Florida earned at least a grade "3" (the grade normally required to receive college credit) on an AP exam during their high school careers, compared to 15.9 percent of test-takers nationally. The College Board notes that Florida, which has the fourth-highest number of students taking AP exams in the nation, experienced the largest single-year increase in the percentage of the student population who received at least one score of 3 or higher on an AP test during high school (3.1 percent).[19] Overall, Florida now ranks fifth in the nation in the percentage of AP test-takers who score at least a 3 while in high school.

The percentage of minority students taking and passing AP exams in Florida has also increased significantly. In 2009, 24.8 percent of AP test-takers in Florida were Hispanic, compared to 15.5 percent nationally. Further, 27.6 percent of AP examinees who earned at least a 3 were Hispanic, compared to just 14.3 percent nationally. In 2009, 12.9 percent of AP test-takers in Florida were black, compared to 8.2 percent nationally. In 2009, 6.3 percent of AP examinees scoring at least a 3 were black, compared to 3.7 percent nationally.[20]

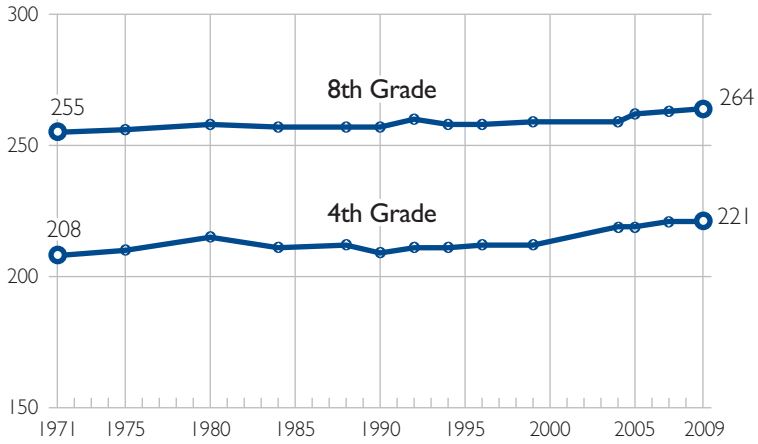
Standards and Accountability. One of the cornerstones of Florida's education reforms was the A+ Accountability Plan, which, beginning in 1999, required students to be tested annually using the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in grades three though 10 in reading and math. Prior to the implementation of the FCAT, eight different norm-referenced tests were administered across the state.[21] In addition to including norm-referenced

15. American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, "Become a Teacher in Florida," at *http://www.abcte.org/teach/florida* (August 27, 2010).
16. Ladner and Lips, "How 'No Child Left Behind' Threatens Florida's Successful Education Reforms."
17. Patricia Levesque, Foundation for Excellence in Education, "Florida Formula for Student Achievement: Lessons for the Nation," PowerPoint presentation at the Education Reform Summit in Atlanta, October 30, 2009.
18. *Ibid.*
19. College Board, "The 6th Annual AP Report to the Nation," February 10, 2010, at *http://www.collegeboard.com/html/aprtn/pdf/ap_report_to_the_nation.pdf* (August 27, 2010).
20. *Ibid.*
21. Levesque, "Florida Formula for Student Achievement: Lessons for the Nation."

Key Education Trends: 1970s to Today

Reading Scores Remain Flat

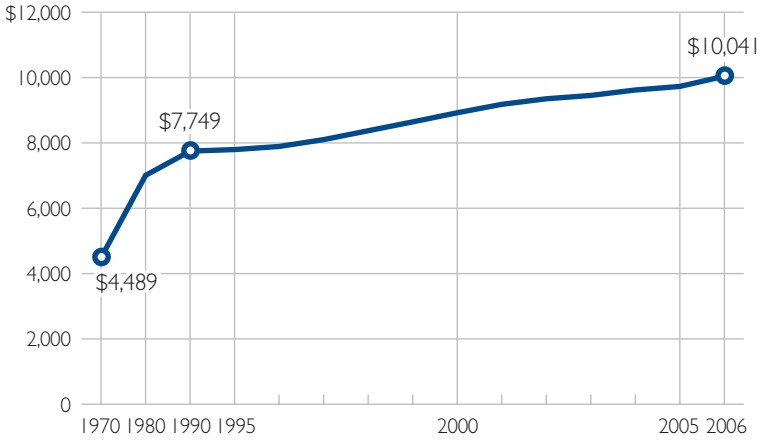
4th- and 8th-Grade Reading Scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress



Source: Data from 1971 to 2008 from National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008 Long-Term Trend Data, at *http://nationsreportcard.gov/ltt_2008/ltt0003.asp* (October 1, 2010). 2009 data from National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, at *http://nationsreportcard.gov* (October 1, 2010).

Education Costs Have More than Doubled

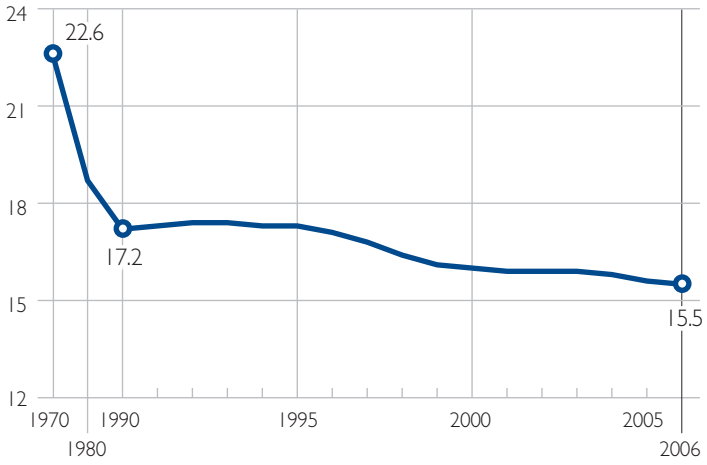
Per-student spending in public elementary and secondary schools in 2007–2008 dollars



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, at *http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=66* (July 30, 2010).

Student–Teacher Ratios Continue to Decline

Students per teacher in public schools



Note: 1970 figure was taken at the end of the school year; 1980–2006 figures were taken at the beginning of the school year.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, at *http://www.nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_080.asp?referrer=list* (July 30, 2010).

Chart 3 • B 2468 heritage.org

measures, the new FCAT included criterion-referenced measures to compare Florida's students to students across the country. The FCAT, which aligns with Florida's strong state standards, also provided the necessary data for the Sunshine State to begin grading schools and districts.

While Florida has graded schools since 1995, in 1999 the Sunshine State moved from an uninformative I–V scale to a more straightforward A–F grading scale for schools and districts. The new grading system coupled with the introduction of the FCAT meant that both schools and students were held accountable for academic outcomes. While the state bases school grades on student performance on the FCAT, beginning in 2001, the state based 50 percent of the grade on learning gains. In addition, in 2010, graduation rates for at-risk students, all other graduation rates, and college readiness began to count toward grades.[22] When Florida implemented the new grading system in 1999, there were more D and F schools than schools earning an A or B. As of 2009, Florida's A and B grades exceeded D and F grades by a factor of 10.[23] Florida created monetary incentives for schools that receive good grades and sanctions for schools that receive poor grades.

In addition to holding schools accountable through the new grading system, Florida also held parents and students accountable by curtailing social promotion. The new education reform plan required students to pass the third-grade reading FCAT before progressing to the fourth grade. Specifically, third-graders who scored only one out of five in reading on the FCAT repeat the third grade and take remediation until they can demonstrate basic literacy skills. The policy does contain a number of exceptions and time limits, but firmly sets the default for an illiterate child to repeat the third grade.

Florida's third-grade retention policy may seem cruel to some, and the research demonstrates that it is indeed cruel to some students—those *exempted* from the policy.[24]

In 2006, approximately 29,000 third-grade students failed the reading portion of the FCAT.[25] Florida's retention policy contained a number of exemptions. An analysis by Manhattan Institute scholars compared the academic progress of retained students to those of two groups of similar students: those who barely scored high enough to avoid retention, and those who scored low enough for retention but received an exemption.

The Manhattan Institute team reported that after two years "retained Florida students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students."[26] The researchers found that the academic benefit increased after the second year: "That is, students lacking in basic skills who are socially promoted appear to fall farther behind over time, whereas retained students appear to be able to catch up on the skills they are lacking."[27]

Schools did not do the exempted children a favor: The retained students learned how to read, while the promoted students continued to fall behind. The students at the bottom proved the biggest winners of Florida's tough-minded reforms. Better yet, the percentage of students scoring low enough to merit retention declined by 40 percent as schools gave greater focus to early childhood literacy.

Closing the Racial Gap Requires Bold Reform

The Nation's Report Card shows that Florida has made enormous progress in closing racial achieve-

22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "Getting Farther Ahead by Staying Behind: A Second-Year Evaluation of Florida's Policy to End Social Promotion," Manhattan Institute *Civic Report* No. 49, September 2006, at *http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_49.htm.*
25. Laura Green, "Despite Rise in Scores, Reading Still Emphasized; Schools Want to Reach Lowest-Performing Students," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, May 4, 2006.
26. Greene and Winters, "Getting Farther by Staying Behind."
27. *Ibid.*

ment gaps. It is worth noting that the limited amount of national progress in raising the scores of black and Hispanic students includes Florida's progress. If Florida's results were taken out of those figures, they would be still less impressive. No national consensus exists to embrace Florida-type reforms, which are still opposed by the education unions despite their obvious and overwhelming success. Reform advocates therefore face the daunting task of implementing these and more far-reaching reforms state by state.

In politics, there are problems and there are conditions. A problem is something one is still trying to fix. A condition is something on which one has given up and simply grown to accept, however uncomfortably. The good news is that racial achievement gaps are a problem to solve, not a condition to accept. In addition, commonsense conservative policies have shown the ability to address the problem—in stark contrast to the failed efforts of previous decades. Regardless of how well-intentioned those past efforts may have been, they failed to deliver the intended results. Early in his tenure as Secretary of Education, Rod Paige stated that "After spending $125 billion of Title I money over twenty-five years, we have virtually nothing to show for it."[28] Sadly, this largely remains the case.

Racial achievement gaps have haunted America long enough. Florida's example shows that it is possible to improve student performance by instituting a variety of curricular, choice-based, and incentive-based reforms, placing pressure on schools to improve. Other states have begun to emulate Florida's successful strategy. Chancellor Joel Klein adopted reforms based on the Florida model in New York City. The legislatures of five states (Arizona, Georgia, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Utah) have adopted special-needs voucher programs following Florida's lead. In 2010, Arizona and Indiana lawmakers adopted major elements of the Florida reforms, including school-grading, the curtailment of social promotion, and alternative teacher certification.

Lessons for Federal and State Policymakers

Florida's successful education reforms should lead policymakers to the following realizations:

- **States have a better track record at improving education than the federal government.** As reauthorization of No Child Left Behind comes under consideration in the near term, policymakers should increase flexibility for states, ultimately freeing them from many of the bureaucratic compliance burdens of the law. Ultimately, schools and school districts will be accountable to parents through many of the reforms the Sunshine State so successfully implemented—school choice, transparency of school and student results, and improved teacher quality. Allowing states the flexibility to implement the types of reforms that best meet their students' needs will ensure that schools are held accountable to parents and taxpayers and that academic achievement is within the grasp of all families.

Recommendations for National Policymakers

National policymakers should free states from federal bureaucracy and allow state leaders to use education funds in a manner that will best meet the needs of their local schools and families.

- **The bureaucratic red tape and regulation from Washington often stands in the way of states' implementation of meaningful education reform.** National policymakers should free states from top-down federal regulations and give state policymakers the opportunity to opt out of federal education programs. States should be allowed to use education funds in a way that will best meet the needs of their local schools and families. States should also be allowed to consolidate federal funding in order to better direct resources to any lawful education purpose under state statute.

28. Larry Elder, *Showdown* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), p. 45.

- National policymakers should permit state leaders to allow parents to take their share of federal education funding to a school of their choice. Parents should be allowed to use their share of federal education funds for programs like the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and Title I at a school of their choice.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

State policymakers should implement systemic education reforms to ensure accountability is strengthened to parents and taxpayers.

- **Florida provides a real-life example of the potential of systemic education reform to improve academic achievement.** Expanding parental school choice, ending social promotion, and increasing school accountability to parents and taxpayers has led to improved academic achievement and school performance. State policymakers should implement systemic education reforms to ensure accountability to parents and taxpayers.

Conclusion

Since 1985, inflation-adjusted per-pupil education spending has increased 138 percent. And just as federal funding for education has grown, so has federal red tape. But despite an ever-increasing federal role in education, academic achievement has languished.

There is a way to truly improve education, which embraces a philosophy that restores state sovereignty and elevates states as laboratories of reform. Florida serves as a prime example of the ability of states to do what they do best: innovate in a way that best meets the needs of local students and families. Florida is accomplishing what education-reform advocates nationwide have worked for over the past few decades: to eliminate achievement gaps and put educational opportunity within the grasp of all children. Federal and state policymakers should view Florida as an example of what is possible if parent-centered and student-centered reform strategies are implemented.

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